

MASS. G70.2:ST 29/2002

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JANE SWIFT
GOVERNOR

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State of Education 2002 Address

Thursday, September 5, 2002
West Roxbury High School

Embargoed until delivery at approximately 10:00 a.m.

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Governor Jane M. Swift

State of Education 2002 Address

Thursday, September 5, 2002

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Thank you Superintendent Payzant and Headmaster Pellegrini for your warm welcome.

I am honored to be at Westie. This is a school that defines the state of education in Massachusetts today – a state of progress – progress steeped in the absolute belief that every child deserves a world-class education. And that every child, regardless of race, income or zip code, can and will learn.

Nine years ago, this progress began with a commitment – a commitment to improve our school system – to give meaning to a Massachusetts diploma – and to provide every child with the skills they need for a lifetime of opportunity. We fueled this commitment by investing nearly 27 billion dollars in our schools. We partnered with teachers to create advanced curriculum frameworks and high standards.

Today, we're seeing the results of that hard work and commitment – results that are driving positive change in classrooms all across the Commonwealth. In classrooms like Mrs. Alonso's at Lawrence Technical High School.

- Mrs. Alonso's geometry class was struggling.
- All 14 of her students recently immigrated to America – most within only a year.
- They didn't read or speak English very well. Some had never taken algebra.
- They had only two goals – to pass geometry and to pass the MCAS.

Mrs. Alonso drafted a contract and each student signed it. They agreed that they would pass the math MCAS as a class – no one would be left behind.

- The classroom became their after school hang out.
- Chairs were no longer lined up in neat rows, but arranged in a circle so everyone could face one another.
- If someone missed class, they called to find out where they were.
- If someone didn't understand a problem, they went through it, together.
- In the next six months, no one forgot to do their homework. Not one failed a test.

And when the time came, all 14 – every one of them – passed the math portion of the December retest.

Several of these students and their remarkable teacher are here with us today. Would you please stand so we can congratulate you on your success. Your success is a testament to the very spirit of education reform – to what is possible when teachers and students join together and commit to a path of excellence. And when the challenge of high standards is seen as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

I'm proud that even more students are sharing your success. Following the May retest, 83 percent of the class of 2003 has passed the math portion of MCAS. This clearly shows that our students are learning the skills they need to succeed – not just simple addition and subtraction, but high level math and problem solving skills necessary for success in today's job market.

Behind these numbers are inspirational stories like that of Thomas Martin from Durphy High in Fall River. Tom is here with us today.

- Like many juniors his age, Tom dealt with the pressure of balancing both school and work.
- But unlike many students, he also dealt with the overwhelming pain of losing his father, grandparents and uncle—all within a short period of time.
- School was the last thing on his mind. And his first MCAS scores showed it.
- But Tom refused to give up.
- He attended every in-school and after school extra help program at Durphy.
- He sought guidance and advice from his teachers – and support from his mom.

And last December, Tom didn't just pass MCAS, he excelled – jumping 28 points in English and 12 in Math.

I want to congratulate Tom for his success and his determination. Your refusal to give up in the face of challenge is representative of the response we're seeing from thousands of your classmates. More students than ever before are taking advantage of extra help and work study programs. They're attending Saturday tutoring sessions and staying after school.

And most importantly, they're staying in school. The state's overall high school drop out rate has not increased. And in many schools – particularly in urban districts – drop out rates have actually declined.

Staying in school and working hard are only part of our students' success. Equally important are the advancements being made in curriculum and classroom instruction. This is particularly evident in student writing.

Deb MacDonald – who is here with us today – can vouch for that. She's been a dedicated high school English teacher for 28 years. And she's spent the last two summers evaluating MCAS essays. Deb has observed that:

- Students are reading more carefully.
- They're doing a better job organizing and expressing their ideas.
- They're writing about different books and characters that are outside of the standard curriculum.
- And students are making concrete connections between what they read and what they think.

Deb credits standards-based teaching and its new emphasis on writing for the great gains being made by all students – at all grade levels.

I want to thank Deb and all of the teachers here at Westie and throughout the Commonwealth. Your commitment to improve teaching and learning in the classroom has never wavered – nor has your dedication to our children. It's a result of your efforts that today 88 percent of the class of 2003 has passed the English portion of MCAS.

As teachers, you are one of our children's most valuable resources. What you do in the classroom shapes our children's values and their minds – but you can't do it alone. That is why communities across the Commonwealth are joining with teachers and parents to embrace the challenge of high standards – and helping to ensure that our students have every opportunity to meet that challenge. Boston is one community that is leading the way in creating new opportunities.

The Classroom at the Workplace program, run by Boston's Private Industry Council, is a great example.

- It began as a pilot program in 1999 with just 26 students.
- This summer it got support from the state Department of Education.
- And 220 students in the Class of 2003 who had not passed MCAS were working to do just that.
- They worked full-time, paid jobs at places like Fleet, Mass General and the Zoo New England.
- In addition to working, students spent 90 minutes everyday learning English and math in workplace classrooms staffed by Boston public school teachers.

This is the kind of public-private partnership that we must expand. We must encourage even greater business involvement in creating opportunities for our students – particularly for young people who enter the workforce next summer without a high school diploma. This will be critical in the coming months, as students in the Class of 2003 begin their senior year and begin to look beyond high school.

Graduation day is fast approaching. And even more students in the class of 2003 are prepared for that day. After two re-tests, 81 percent of the Class of 2003 has passed both the math and English portions of MCAS. Congratulations. This is an impressive result.

But I know the question many of you have is what happens to students who don't meet the MCAS standard by graduation day. Today, I'm announcing several policies that will help them and every student reach their goals.

First, I've directed the Department of Education to increase remediation funds for high schools to sixty percent of the total grants.

I'm proud that even in a tough budget year, there was bipartisan support to sustain historic levels of spending on extra help programs – 50 million dollars. And it's critical that more of these dollars be made available for our juniors and seniors.

Second, any student in the Class of 2003 will be able to participate in their school's MCAS remediation programs through the summer following their senior year. Those who meet their local graduation requirements – but not the MCAS standard – can spend the summer in free tutoring programs in their school or a workplace. They will then be able to take another re-test in the fall.

Because, third, we will expand the number of opportunities to take the focused MCAS exam from two to four. Starting next September, the first re-test of the school year will be given in early fall, soon after students complete their summer extra help programs. The second re-test will be given in February. This will ensure that students get their results back well before the end of the school year – and before they need to make decisions about summer school or work-study internships.

The standard MCAS test will still be given in the spring. And with these additional focused re-tests, students will now have seven opportunities to pass MCAS before the end of their senior year.

Finally, we recognize the fact that despite enormous effort, some students will not pass MCAS and will not graduate with their class. But, we must continue to give them the basic skills they need for a lifetime of opportunity. We will direct MCAS remediation funds to some of our community colleges to develop programs specifically for students who enter community college without a high school diploma.

And our statewide network of career centers will work with employers who already hire these students, to provide them access to continuing education opportunities to earn their diploma.

These steps will provide even greater opportunity for success and will continue the progress we've made in reforming our education system – progress that began with the commitment of teachers, parents, communities and government to work together for our children. And progress that has been advanced by our students rising to the challenge of high standards and refusing to give up.

Students like Courtney Goncalo who I met during a visit to a work-study program aboard the USS Massachusetts. And who is here with us today.

- Courtney is a bright and confident girl.
- But she was close to failing high school Math. Because she didn't understand the subject matter, she often skipped class. And she didn't do her homework.
- She felt doomed to fail MCAS, especially the math portion.
- This was her wake up call.
- She knew that she needed extra help. And that she would have to make a commitment to work even harder.
- Last summer, she enrolled in her school's work-study program – where she worked part-time and received two hours of math instruction everyday.
- When school started, she was a different student – more confident, more focused and more committed.

- Her math grade increased two grade levels to a B+. And on her first try, she passed both sections of the MCAS.
- Today, as a member of the Bristol Youth Council, she spends her time talking to other students and encouraging them to get the extra help they need.
- She's also preparing to study criminal justice in college next fall. Congratulations, Courtney.

These stories are what education reform is all about. It is not really about MCAS and grades, or school boards and budgets. It's about children – our children – each one of you – and about providing you with a life full of promise and opportunity.

Let us continue our commitment to excellence. Let us continue to celebrate stories of success – stories that illustrate how education reform has transformed our schools – and how high standards have brought value to our children's education and opportunity to their lives. Let history show that Massachusetts worked together for her children – and that every child had the opportunity to achieve excellence. Thank You.

